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## **Why Broadcast Decency Laws Matter To Our Children**

By Congressman Joe Pitts

"If you don't like what's on your TV, turn it off." That's the line I most frequently hear when the content of television programming is called indecent or inappropriate for public airwaves.

My best response is: if you don't like the standards elected officials have placed on content broadcast over public airwaves, change the law.

Under that law, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has jurisdiction over public broadcast airwaves. Networks, channels, companies and others receive licenses from the FCC to broadcast material over these airwaves. The FCC can impose fines of up to \$27,500 on broadcasters who violate federal decency laws which have withstood court challenges and the test of time. However, the FCC has been inconsistent in enforcing them.

This year, a plan to strengthen penalties on broadcasters who break the law stalled in the Senate. An effort to attach an unrelated provision to the bill doomed the bill to failure. We will not give up, however. This bill and efforts to maintain sensible decency standards are important not for adults who are offended by certain material, but for our children.

Psychologist Dr. Phil McGraw is an expert on family psychology and child development. Known to his fans as "Dr. Phil," his daily television program often features troubled families addressing issues long left unresolved.

During a recent appearance on NBC's *Today*, Dr. Phil discussed the challenges facing children in today's world. The first thing he identified was the proliferation of images depicting sexual and violent acts.

From video games to movies, television to radio, today's kids are confronted with material that previous generations never had to face. The problem with this, according to Dr. Phil, is that children do not know how to make sense of these images.

"Their brains aren't even through growing until their early-20's. And the last part of the teen-age brain that grows is reasoning and logic. So we can't let them

make the decisions that they're making today. And that's a problem," Dr. Phil told Katie Couric on *Today*.

Biologically children simply cannot distinguish between right and wrong to the same extent adults can. Their brains can take in information, but cannot use judgment to determine whether that information is worth keeping or, in this case, whether that behavior is worth modeling.

Dr. Phil's comments were underscored by a study recently released by the RAND Corporation. The study found that children who watch a lot of TV with sexual content are twice as likely to be sexually active as those with little exposure to televised sexual behavior.

"The impact of television is so large that even a moderate shift in the sexual content of adolescent TV watching could have a substantial effect on their sexual behavior," said Rebecca Collins, a RAND psychologist who headed the study of 1,792 adolescents between the ages of twelve and seventeen.

Even when other factors that influence decision making were considered, television had the strongest impact.

It is not difficult to understand. Sexuality is pervasive on television, present in more than two-thirds of all programming from innuendoes to actual depictions of intercourse.

The study found that as a result TV "may create the illusion that sex is more central to daily life than it truly is and may promote sexual initiation as a result." Kids become absorbed with characters in their favorite shows and begin to model their behavior. They are simply doing what their role models do. Sadly, the study found that doing what their favorite characters do results in regret: many teens wish they had waited longer.

In a culture increasingly devoid of positive role models, television is filling the void. Parents can and should replace television as the primary source of wisdom and information. They should be the first line of defense against negative influences and the first source of education and guidance.

"Talking about television can give parents a chance to express their own views about sex, and viewing shows with their kids will also help parents identify any programs they want to designate as off-limits," Dr. Collins said.

However, the government can support parents and protect kids by enforcing decency laws and being tough on broadcasters who abuse the privilege of using public airwaves.

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